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ABSTRACT

Declining enrollment necessitates thorough educational planning and effective decision-making to deal with the community traumas that usually accompany school closings and curtailment of services. The author outlines suggestions for maintaining good school-community relations through developing consensus, community involvement in decision-making, and preserving school credibility. (Author/DS)

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DECLINING SCHOOL ENROLLMENTS

Donald Thomas

I. Is the Problem Real?

Superintendent Robert Savitt of Plainville, New York, has probably said it better than most. "Superintendents who fail to act in the face of declining enrollments for fear of offending the staff or community are derelict in their duty and are heading for disaster." Many superintendents having lived through a period of growth, are now burying their heads in the sand and hoping that the problem of declining enrollments will disappear. It won't. The simple fact is that it will intensify.

Public school enrollment, which mushroomed in the 1950's and began to level off at the end of the 60's, will show a rather sharp drop between now and 1982.

That is the projection of the U. S. Office of Education in a report, "Projections of Educational Statistics to 1982-83". A digest of the report was issued in mid-April by the Educational Research Service, Inc., an independent research firm sponsored by five administrative organizations including AASA.

The ERS report showed, for instance, that public high school enrollment, which shot up 38 per cent between the fall of 1962 and the fall of 1972, will actually drop by 13 per cent -- 1.8 million youngsters by 1982. Enrollment in the lower grades (K-8) which went up 11 per cent during the same period, will fall off 10 per cent with a projected drop of 3.1 million youngsters by 1982.

Overall, including elementary and high school students, the projection predicts a decline from the fall 1972 public school enrollment of 45.8 million to 40.8 million in 1982 -- a drop of 11 per cent.

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It is easy to see that a loss of 5 million students in a ten year period will have severe effects on school districts throughout the nation. Here are some examples of what has happened.

- Salt Lake City School District grew to 42,000 students and is now down to 26,000.
- Birmingham, Michigan, School District has decreased by 20 per cent in the last five years.
- Arlington Heights, Illinois, High School District, 214 was projected to reach 25,000, but at 17,000 it has begun to decline.
- Santa Clara Unified School District in Santa Clara, California, experienced a sharp rise and is now undergoing a similarly sharp decrease. Last year it closed four relatively new schools.
- The same is true in New York, California, Illinois, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and many other states.

America, and indeed most of the world society, has experienced growth in many different forms. Most of us have lived through and experienced growth throughout most of our lives. In 1965 when I obtained my first superintendency in Elk Grove, Illinois, the school district was growing at the rate of 1,000 students per year. At that time the district had 8,500 students and we were projecting a building program for 15,000 students. Growth, however, did not go beyond 12,000 and the district is now beginning to decrease.

It would seem to be good strategy, therefore, at the present moment to devote intellectual resources to the study of decline so that we may be better informed about what kinds of strategy are successful, what sort of leadership adapts best, and what kind of institutions have survival value in declining situations, as these may be very different from what are appropriate to situations of rapid expansion.

2. An Effective Process for Closing Schools.

One of the basic skills required in a declining enrollment district is that of closing schools. We must be able to consolidate and still maintain public support. To adjust to reduced income, the District must operate fewer units. The pain of closing schools is less severe than the pain of having inadequate money to operate the District.

a. Controlling community conflict. Community conflict often accompanies school closures. No one appreciates the closing of a neighborhood school. Talking about the possibility creates fears, hostility, and organized opposition. While community conflict cannot be avoided, it can be controlled by intelligent leadership by the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools.

The process for controlling conflict is one that requires a great deal of time and effort. It also requires the assistance of many segments of the community. And what may be effective in one community may not be effective in others. Decisions must be made about:

1. The use of citizens' committees.
2. The use of local consultants.

3. The use of outside consultants.
4. The preparation of demographics.
5. The use of community surveys.
6. The use of staff personnel.
7. The release of information.
8. The involvement of the media.

Here is, basically, the plan and the process we followed in Salt Lake City. We believe the process was the best that could be developed under very difficult circumstances. We have found it to be successful for us.

Step 1. Establish a comprehensive citizens' committee to study the problem and make recommendations to the Board of Education.

a. Provide assistance to the committee.
b. Have them operate under a specific charge.
c. Set a date for the final report and do not extend the time.
d. Make the report public at the same time it is given to the Board of Education.

Step 2. Hold public meeting to discuss the report, to develop tentative solutions, and to receive additional information.

a. Discuss implications of conflict on school district.
b. Present problem-solving process to public.

c. Give and receive information.

d. Record all information presented at public hearings.

Step 3. Develop alternate solutions and modify them if necessary.

Step 4. Present final solution at a general public meeting.

Step 5. Take action at an official Board of Education meeting.

Step 6. Implement Board of Education decisions.

b. Preserving school credibility. The process of decision-making must have integrity. Often the Board of Education is accused of having a hidden plan. Many want to believe that the public meetings are not important and that the Board of Education does not really want to hear the public. To preserve credibility we found that the following practices were helpful.

1. Make all information public at the same time it is given to the Board of Education.
2. Hold only public meetings. Agree not to have executive sessions during a school closure process.
3. Send all reports to community decision-makers.
4. Establish tentative solutions and show modifications made because of public hearings.
5. Work closely with the media - keep them informed at all times.
6. Keep parents and students informed. Mail out newsletters, invitations to public hearings, summary of tentative solutions, and modifications considered.

c. Developing concensus. The following items are needed in order to develop community concensus.

1. A process which is open, which has integrity, and which has credibility.
2. A basic school closure criteria (Salt Lake City and Birmingham, Michigan).
3. Support of the opinion-leaders.
4. Concensus on the Board of the Education (if possible).
5. Support of the employees of the school district.
6. Agreement between the Superintendent and the Board of Education.

Obtaining any kind of concensus on school closure is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, it is possible if everything works well. Especially important is the editorial position of the local media. We in Salt Lake City were fortunate to have strong editorial support from both the TV stations and the newspapers. When the final Board decisions were made, the media supported the decisions and requested the public to do so also.

The problem-solving process has also been used in other areas of potential conflict. Two policies which are used to control community conflict are these:

1. The Review of Services Process.
2. The Educational Audit Process.

3. Bread and Butter Issues.

School districts faced with declining enrollments have a number of bread and butter issues. It is the job of the superintendent and the

Board of Education to find acceptable ways:

a. To reduce school staffs.

b. To utilize or sell surplus space.

c. To conserve money.

d. To increase transportation services.

e. To obtain support for Board of Education decisions.

Each of these areas is potentially dangerous and can cause a host of problems for the most experienced superintendent. We can learn something from districts that have already wrestled with them. Here are some ideas you may wish to consider in each of these areas.

a. Reducing school staffs.

1. Staffing at mid-year enrollments.
2. Early retirement.
3. Trained substitute group.
4. Working with neighboring school districts.
5. Special projects.
6. Training secondary teachers for elementary positions.
7. Reducing staff through stronger termination for cause procedures.

b. Utilizing surplus space.

1. Rentals to other agencies.
2. Sales at highest bid.
3. Use for supplementary services.
4. Special education centers for several districts.

c. Conserving resources.

1. Staffing at mid-year enrollments.
2. Holding to staffing ratios.
3. Rent out surplus space.
4. Adopting early retirement plans.
5. Decentralizing budget accounts.
6. Developing a review of new program procedure.

d. Handling the busing problem.

1. Showing the neighborhood concept.
2. Contracting for additional transportation services.
3. Passing legislation for more transportation revenue.
4. Providing open enrollment options.
5. Answering the questions of psychological damage of moving. (The parent attitudes)

e. Support for Board of Education decisions.

1. The role of principals.
2. The role of teachers' associations.
3. The role of Board members.
4. The role of the Superintendent.
5. The role of employees.

Support for Board of Education decisions should be immediate and total. If there is any division among the groups, the public will take advantage of the crack to ask for a review of the decisions. When doubt exists among employees, parents will continue to harass board members and the superintendent.

Support for Board decisions can be demonstrated by quick action on the part of principals and Central office staff. The more decisive the action, the more credibility in the minds of everyone.

4. The Consolidation Effort.

One especially important item is the ability of the administration to implement quickly the decisions of the Board of Education. The administration must be ready to place into operation a detailed plan to implement Board of Education decisions, the day after such decisions are made. Here is an outline of what must be done.

I. Immediate Items

A. Personnel allocations

B. Course selections and student scheduling

C. Student and parent orientation

D. Curriculum content

E. Training - junior high school teachers

F. Transportation

G. Student activities program

H. Assignment of Administrators

I. Budget implications

1. Additional help during transition period

2. Equipment need

3. Textbooks - different ones in different junior high schools.

4. Supplies

5. Books from libraries

J. Public information program

K. Building remodeling

1. P.E. facilities

2. Lockers

3. Media

4. Shops

II. Assignment of Responsibilities

A. Curriculum adaptations and teacher re-orientation.

B. Budget implications and incidental expenses.

C. Athletic and activities program adaptations.

D. Building and furniture redistribution.

E. Textbook, supply, and equipment distribution.

F. Transportation adjustments.

III. Problems For Future Consideration

A. Distribution of library books.

B. Parent orientation and public information.

C. Adjustments in student body officers and student representation.

D. Parent participation in school governance - new units.

It is important that a calendar be established and that someone be assigned to monitor the completion of each task. A monitoring schedule is given to each staff person and one member is assigned the responsibility of seeing to it that all tasks are completed on schedule.

Special services must be provided to displaced students and displaced parents. No reduction of services should be implemented.

If improved educational services are possible, such services should be emphasized.

a. Plans to assist displaced students

1. At the present school level.

A. Principal's information program.

B. Student government program.

C. Classroom teacher information program.

2. At the new school level.

A. Orientation program.

B. New school visitation.

C. Special counseling services.

3. At the district level.

A. Parent newsletters.

B. Student newspapers.

C. Central office resource speakers.

4. At the public level.

A. Cooperation with media.

B. Invitation to public hearings.

C. Invitation to Board meetings.

5. The District-wide Student Conference.

b. Programs to integrate displaced parents.

1. At the old school level.

A. Principal's orientation program.

B. P.T.A. information program.

2. At the new school level.

   A. Meet the principal program.

   B. Orientation programs.

   C. Inclusion in governance structure.

   D. Special counseling services.

3. At the district level.

   A. Parent newsletters.

   B. Invitation to Board meetings.

   C. General media information.

4. District-wide parent conference.

c. Ways to improve educational services.

1. Educational improvements.

   A. More comprehensive course offerings.

   B. More extensive extra-class activities program.

   C. Greater ability to maintain advanced placement courses.

2. Introduction of new services.

   A. Full-time library services.

   B. Program for talented students.

   C. Senior seminar program.

   D. Counseling services.

   E. Teacher education services.

   F. Teacher accountability program.

   G. Audit procedure.

   H. Review of services process.

3. Improvement of current services.

   A. Increased transportation services.

   B. Improved athletic program.

C. Improved materials in reading, mathematics, science and music areas.

D. Improved food services program.

5. Can We Survive Declining Enrollments?

We, as school officials, will be able to survive declining enrollments in much the same manner as we have survived growth, collective negotiations, accountability, and reduced budgets. Declining enrollments, however, will require more planning and more sensitive skills.

The general decline in the fertility rate is a more serious problem than a decline in a single area like agriculture or mining. When there is a general decline in the total population, the waves to decline affect the entire society. Therefore, the problems become more difficult to attack.

In an advancing society people are almost sucked out of a declining industry by the jobs created by the expanding ones. If there is little expansion in other parts of the society, then the transfer out of the declining industries may be difficult and adjustment to decline becomes a much more serious social problem. I am not suggesting that we are facing these problems immediately. I do not expect a stationary population in the United States for many decades and I do not expect stationary real incomes for perhaps an even longer period. I do, however, expect a considerable slowdown in the rate of expansion of population and in the rate of increase of real income. This will affect one segment of society after another, so that the sooner we begin thinking about these problems of adjustment to decline the better prepared we will be for what lies ahead. Education, as I suggested, will be the first major segment of the society to be affected by decline and we are already well into this period.

Nevertheless, I am confident that we can deal with these problems. Educators have always served and served well this great nation. We will continue to do so in the years ahead.